AMONG THE MUMMERS

By ALAN DALE

ONCE please the women, and success will stare you out of countenance. Every manager engaged in the tinkling process of shekel-manipulation knows that. Catch the fair sex. They are the real patrons of the theatre. One woman's curtain lecture on the drama is worth more than the dreary diatribes of ten analytical men. I don't like to see a dramatic critic at the playhouse, womanless. I would much sooner take my cook than go alone. Feminine comments are invaluable, either for or against a play. Their illogical charm and their non-technical insight are substantial aids to the cold and occasionally inhuman masculine judgment. Besides, theatre-going—if you would only believe it—isn't such a dreadfully serious affair. It is relaxation; that is all.

Pinero's new play at the Lyceum, "The Benefit of the Doubt," pleases the analytical men. Women will hate it. It will arouse feminine indignation, and feminine disgust, and the Lubin who dares to tell his Dulcinea that he has had a "good time" at the Lyceum, will rue it afterward.

This latest comedy is, of course, technically perfect. It would be a pity if it were not. Pinero has been pegging away at plays for many years. He has acquired a supreme knowledge of the theatre. He can bring his characters on and take them off again without dangling the strings in your face. He doesn't need half a dozen doors in order to arrange a humorous situation. He has learned to eschew intercepted letters. No servants with feather dusters in their hands explain things to the audience as the curtain rises. Pinero knows his technique. He would be an irretrievable fool if he did not. Playmaking is a trade with him. It is perfectly uninspired.

Why this technical perfection should call forth any very boisterous praise I cannot for the life of me imagine. One would suppose that the mission of a dramatic writer was to uphold the playwright; that he was paid to foster the drama, to educate the youthful aspirant, and all that sort of thing. Is he, though? Doesn't it seem to you that the first duty of the critic lies in the direction of his public? He is supported by the public, not by the playwrights. What on earth is the use of glossing over evil efforts just for the sake of taffying the dramatist? Where does the advantage of lauding non-sympathetic technicality come in? The public simply doesn't understand it. If a play lacks the human touches that men and women demand, its technique will not save it. The blase theatre-goer will perhaps hail it as a boon, but for each blase theatre-goer there are nine hundred and ninety-nine non-blase people. And then, there are the women!

In "The Benefit of the Doubt" the theatrical heroine does such preposterous things that, with all the well-known vagaries of her sex as an excuse, she cannot be tolerated for a moment. This heroine, Mrs. Fraser, has been the cause of contention between Jack Allingham and his wife. Mrs. Allingham has sued for a judicial separation. The case has been dismissed, but Mrs. Fraser has suffered, for the judge has merely given her the benefit of the doubt.

From the courtroom she goes to her mother's home, which is filled with degenerate people, who cackle smartly, but who never at any moment make a single remark showing the possession of live blood and human ideas. Mrs. Fraser meets her husband there, and promises to be a good wife henceforth, if he will take her away and cherish her. He repels her advances cold-blooded-ly, and insinuates that he is suspicious himself of her alleged virtue. Thereupon she instantly decides to leave him. She sits down with her face to the audience and writes him a note, puts on her bonnet and shawl and sets forth.

Now, under the circumstances, what would a woman do? I appeal to her sex. Wouldn't she try governessing, dressmaking, typewriting, nursing, or something of that sort? She has just made ardent protestations of honorable intentions to her husband. Mrs. Fraser, however, marches right off to Jack Allingham, reaches his home in Epsom at a very ungodly hour, goes to a hotel at the station, and sends him word that she wants to see him on business.

Jack, who is the most blithering idiot I have ever seen, is enjoying a scene with his wife and with Mrs. Fraser's relatives, who are already hunting for her, when the little missive reaches him from the hotel. Mrs. Allingham insists that he shall see Mrs. Fraser, but stipulates an eavesdropping arrangement. She shall listen in an adjoining room to everything that Mrs. Fraser says. This scene, held up as technically perfect, is, to me, incomparably infamous. Every character in the play loses the sympathy of the audience, and a most dangerous antipathy is established.

Mrs. Fraser arrives at Jack's house. Mrs. Jack goes into the library with her ear glued to a separatory curtain. You hate Jack; you hate Mrs. Jack; you hate Mrs. Fraser, and you hate yourself for sitting quietly and countenancing it all. The injured wife begins to talk, and asks for fifty pounds to go away with.

Would you, my little Dulcinea, accused of illicitly loving another woman's husband, and protesting your innocence, rush right off to that other woman's husband and ask him for fifty pounds while there was a shred of flesh on your fingers, or an ounce of energy in your arms? With Pinero's hot-house creations, of course, honest labor would be a crime, but here in America people don't understand that sort of criminality. The sweat of the brow is no disgrace.

As soon as she has asked and received the money, thereby rendering herself unutterably loathsome, she feels faint, and falls back in her chair. You hope that she is dead, but only those whom the gods love die young. The gods—gallery and otherwise—must sicken at this horrible parody of a woman. Jack seizes a jug containing a champagne concoction and gives it to her. She drinks it greedily, like a regular old rounder. It has no sooner touched her lips than she becomes hopelessly intoxicated. It is a jag. I hate the word, but that's the only one to use.

Mrs. Fraser reels about hopelessly bejagged. She gives herself away, asks Jack to fly with her, smokes a cigarette—always the acme of perfidy, and the perquisite of the woman with the past—and at that moment Mrs. Allingham appears. It is a mistake to call this incident dramatic. It is not dramatic. It is purely theatrical. It is absurdly improbable, overweeningly farfetched, and ineffably stomach-agitating. In the next act she is disgusted with Jack and repentant.

That is all there is to "The Benefit of the Doubt." In England, where Pinero is a classic, there was talk of withdrawing the piece long ago, but people went to the theatre once more, because there is so little else in London just now. To the credit of the Lyceum first night audience be it said that the last act was received in derision, and the "jag" act was accorded the most polite tolerance. You see, theatre-goers, as I have tried to show, don't care a hang about technique. They want human, lovable characters, and they want them as non-conventional as possible. "The Benefit of the Doubt" is quite as bad as "A Woman's Silence." It is the most foolish affair that I have ever seen at Mr. Frohman's playhouse.

Isabel Irving was utterly incompetent to cope with the role of the lady with the jag. Perhaps Maude Adams could have done it. Miss Adams might possibly have made the part almost convincing. Miss Irving is exactly the kind of woman who could never have been guilty of any of the inconsistencies attributed to Mrs. Fraser. How absurd it is for managers to cast a woman for a leading role utterly unsuited to her, because she happens to be the leading lady of the company! In London they are not so illogical. They hunt around for a fitting interpreter. Mrs. Campbell flits from one playhouse to another; so does Julia Neilson; so does Winifred Emery; so does Mrs. Beerbohm Tree; so does Marion Terry.

Miss Elita Proctor Otis as the jealous wife was also hopelessly at sea. The role was too petty for her splendid talents. I am very fond of Miss Otis, and I was sorry to see the tangle from which she was unable to extricate herself. The ordinary theatre-goer couldn't have detected a trace of ability in her work. Unconsciously, she amused the audience. Mrs. Whiffen played delightfully. Her part was the only sympathetic one in the piece, so her struggles were not as arduous as those of her colleagues. Miss Tyree—who has dropped the Bessie and emerged as a full-fledged Elizabeth—spoke with her usual unsal common-ness, and Mr. Kelcey looked fat, complacent and inexpressive. A frown is all the emotion that Mr. Kelcey can supply. I am bound to admit that he turned on a few frowns. Fritz Williams as a disgusting cub was sufficiently effective, but Mr. Grattan seemed all the time as though he had goods to sell concealed in the pockets of his garments, and was waiting for an opportunity to "spring" them. Mr. Grattan has a great deal to learn, but I'm afraid that he wont learn it.

Will mere technique prevail against the arrant theatrical hypocrisy and deft humbug of "The Benefit of the Doubt?"

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"Mrs. Ponderbury's Past" was written five years ago. It is now at the Garrick Theatre. Its 1891-ness is suspicious. No Daly adapted it; no Frohman snapped it up; no Palmer instructed his foreign agent to buy it at any cost. These gentlemen are never caught napping, and when a play goes begging for five years, one can't help looking askance. When American playwrights turn out acceptable farces, of course such uncharitable proceedings will be impossible.

The play at the Garrick is not devoid of humor, but the central character, an old libertine, is not funny to the American mind. The roue with one foot in the grave is a very serious affair, at whom no right-minded person can be expected to laugh. In a serious play like "The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith" he is more appropriate than he is in a farce like "Mrs. Ponderbury's Past." Well-intentioned men talk a great deal of rubbish about the evil effect of the stage, but nudity is about the only theme they seem able to find to substantiate their arguments. Yet a character like Mr. Ponderbury—a gray-headed old chap, with a gray-headed old wife—indulging in liaisons and peeping through holes in the wall at decollete ladies, is surely a menace, when he is produced as a subject for laughter and light entertainment.

The hero of this farce is a very nasty old fellow, and nastiness should be confined to youth, when the blood is ebullient, and frailty intelligible. I couldn't laugh at all at his peccadilloes, for they were of such an exceedingly slimy nature.

Most of Burnand's wit is of the living-picture order, and we have outgrown that sort of thing. Still, "Mrs. Ponderbury's Past" has one or two funny incidents, and it may serve Stuart Robson's purpose. His mannerisms are all brought out by the farce, and a great many people like those mannerisms, for they associate them with some of the successful parts in which the actor has appeared. Mrs. Stuart Robson, an extremely adipose person, is completely out of her element as Mme. Polacca di Lowinski, formerly Polly Stubbs, of the "music halls." She is deliberate and ponderous, instead of being frolicsome and diaphonous. Burnand has purified the play very considerably. The original "Mme.

Mongodin," by Ernest Blum and Raoul Toche, must have been a veritable cyclone of naughtiness.

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The poor 'ansom cabby at the Fifth Avenue Theatre has had a very bad time of it. The litigation caused by "Gentleman Joe" had aroused the expectations of the public. It was a case of "out of the mountain crept a mouse." This musical farce hung fire for a long time. Jack Crabtree was the first to secure it; then it was rumored that Nat Goodwin had it; others were also in the field. Finally, the rights of possession simmered down to M. B. Curtis and Rudolph Aronson. Mr. Aronson returned from abroad flushed with conquest. He had got "Gentleman Joe;" he had lured Minnie Palmer to these shores; he also had a colossal scheme for the erection of a $300,000 theatre somewhere on Fifty-ninth street—it didn't matter where.

As seen at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, "Gentleman Joe" wouldn't tempt a schoolboy to accept a free pass. How the farce can ever be a success without Arthur Roberts is a mystery to me. It reminds me of that other one-part piece, "The New Boy," which caught London on account of the work of Weedon Grossmith, for whom it was written. In the English provinces, without Mr. Grossmith, the farce was a failure. In New York, without Mr. Grossmith, the farce was also a failure. A play written to fit a certain actor belongs to that actor. If you want the play you must take the actor with it.

The company at the Fifth Avenue Theatre last Wednesday night appeared to be intensely discouraged. Mr. Willard Lee, who played the part of the cabby, was not enthusiastically received. Poor Mr. Willard Lee! His job was not a grateful one. I always feel sorry for actors who understudy stars, although I don't suppose that they consider themselves subjects for compassion. Miss Annie Myers was the only redeeming feature of the organization.

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The week has been a most theatrically prolific one, and the critics will probably spend their Sunday in bed recuperating. At Hoyt's Theatre "A Black Sheep" was easily appreciated. It called for no mental efforts and it was full of frothy specialties. An occasional homeopathic dose of farce-comedy needs not be condemned even by the people who think thoughts. A non-frequent whiff of Hoyt is agreeable. "A Trip to Chinatown" settled that point beyond the peradventure of a doubt. It is when this gentleman tries to preach, as he did in "A Temperance Town," or to coquette with the gravities, as he did in his undertaker's drama, "A Milk White Flag," that we say rude things to him.

At Daly's Theatre "The Two Escutcheons" has been kindly commented upon. Miss Ada Rehan insists upon being effervescently juvenile, but sooner than do without her we must e'en bow to her dictates. To Mr. Daly and his playwrights Miss Rehan will probably always be sixteen years old. When she has attained dear old Mrs. Gilbert's majority the indications are that we shall still see her in baby dresses, with fluffy gold hair. She is a remarkable woman; she is ultra-fascinating, or she could never interest us as she does in parts that few managers would ask her to play.

"Saved from the Sea," at the Columbus Theatre, Harlem, is not at all a bad melodrama. Its comedy saves it from the unhappy fate into which its double-distilled sensations would undoubtedly have plunged it. It's a good play for the gallery, and no playwright need be ashamed of catering to the boys who haunt the ceilings of the playhouses. Why shouldn't these playwrights be frank about their intentions? Why skulk in the shadow of Broadway with sensational letters that can never be appreciated on that fastidious thoroughfare?

"Saved from the Sea" is infinitely better than "The Great Diamond Robbery," the authors of which were highly indignant when I suggested that their effort was aimed at the gallery.

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Here's a piece of news that will warm the cockles of your heart. Miss Fanny Davenport, in consideration of a cozy little sum paid to her by Messrs. Abbey, Schoeffel and Grau, will kindly condescend to allow lovely, lean Sarah to appear in "Gismonda," the Sardou play that was written for her, and that we saw at the Fifth Avenue Theatre. An admirable play it is; technically perfect and dramatically thrilling. Miss Davenport produced it magnificently at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, but Miss Davenport was no more able to play the part than George W. Monroe would have been. It is with no disrespect to Miss Davenport that I say this. Her energy deserves credit, but Sarah's mantle doesn't fit her. Sarah is so unchubby, as you know.

Bernhardt will open her season with "Izehl" at Abbey's Theatre. I wouldn't miss one of her performances if I had to starve while she was here. Bernhardt selects "Izehl" because it is new. They tell me that it is very tiresome, but those who don't understand French won't mind that very much. Still it is just as well that they should know it, so that they can say sapiently to their friends that the play was dull, don't you know, although Bernhardt herself, of course, was superb.

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"The Squire of Dames," which John Drew is to give us at Palmer's Theatre, is now running at the Criterion in London. Drew is rapidly becoming a sort of American Wyndham. The play is an adaptation from Dumas's "L'Ami des Femmes," which was first produced in Paris in 1864. It was revived there recently, and Wyndham and Frohman saw it, and made arrangements for its presentation here. Frohman came home, and had three adaptations made, but—now, don't get vexed, ye American adapters—none of them suited. Wyndham secured the services of Carton in London, and it is his version that will be used at Palmer's Theatre.

"The Squire of Dames" is not a "goody-goody affair, being by Dumas, but its characters are truthful and human. It is in four acts and no climaxes. By that I mean that the curtain always falls quietly, not upon a situation, but upon an episode. I should think that John Drew in a sterling play would be extremely happy. He has outgrown the vapidities of such chattering nonsense as "That Imprudent Young Couple" and "The Butterflies." The "onward" policy is a wise one. Nobody except Miss Ada Rehan can successfully toy with soothing syrup for life. Actors and actresses cut their teeth, and the sooner the better. Mr. Drew is no longer as young as he used to be, and although his collegiate hair is unsmirched with the disaster of gray, he cannot hope to be a sleek boy much longer.

Years ago "L'Ami des Femmes" was severely condemned in France, because it told the truth too truthfully, but to-day when we revel in veracity and are confronted with realistic kisses that tickle, and realistic jags that affront, the truth can never be too many for us.

"The Prisoner of Zenda," according to a cable message received in this city during the week, has caught the London public. But it caught the New York public first. So there, now! London managers rejected it; London actors laughed at the mere idea of Anthony Hope on the stage. The fate of the play at the Lyceum was so convincing, however, that this delightful drama, born in London, went there via New York and has been acclaimed. Let us chuckle. We will chuckle any way. As a matter of fact we will gloat. We insist upon gloating. Wild horses cannot drag us away from this pastime.

Yes, "The Prisoner of Zenda" is at the St. James, and "Trilby" is still at the Haymarket turning 'em away. London has followed the craze that was rampant here. There are Trilby everythings, and the comic papers are behaving just as they did over here. And now Fred Carr, who is running the Strand Theatre, has secured from W. J. Penley, Mrs. Madeleine Lucette Ryley's play, "Christopher, Jr.," which New Yorkers saw at the Empire Theatre. It is now being rehearsed in London, where it will be done under the name of "Jedbury, Jr." If the piece can succeed in London without John Drew and Maude Adams, it will be a splendid triumph for little Mrs. Ryley.

These London productions of American successes will give you an idea of the absolute scarcity of new plays on the other side of the pond. It will lure American playwrights away from the idea that managers don't want to produce successes merely because they are successes, a notion that seems to prevail in certain discontented quarters.

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The great American $3,000,000 syndicate, under the chaperonage of Joseph Brooks, is hard at work, and its gleaming gold is tempting actors and actresses of repute. J. H. Gilmour and Miss Anne O'Neill have already been secured for the inaugural in September. The very best dramas, the very best comedies, the very best comic operas, the very best burlettas, the very best comedy dramas, and the very best farces will, I am assured, be produced. In the meantime there will be a preliminary season in July at McVicker's Theatre in Chicago, where a play will be run through the Summer for the benefit of New York next season.

This resembles Mr. Brooks's plan a couple of Summers ago, when he produced "New Blood" in the Windy City, and then brought it to New York to do or die. Unfortunately, it died, but that's a detail. Mr. Brooks has faith in Chicago, which approved of "New Blood." The fact that New York didn't was of course merely due to metropolitan perversity, which must and shall be overcome. A good, seething, continuous dose of Chicago successes will most undoubtedly stun New York into appreciation. There is nothing in this world like persistence. It is, in fact, an excellent substitute for genius.

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Philadelphia has just discovered the existence of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. Philadelphia is slow, but sure. It takes a long time for good attractions to penetrate its marble heart, but when they get there the marble crumbles, and the auricles and ventricles do the rest. Irving's recent Philadelphia engagement brought in for one week $29,155, and his manager didn't tell me that, either. It's a fact that is worth chronicling, because it occurred in Philadelphia. This is the biggest week's money that Irving has ever drawn, with the exception of one similar period in San Francisco, when $30,000 were bagged. I bet that Irving will tell the Philadelphians that he is sorry that he wasn't born there. Sir Henry and Miss Terry are going to be just as charmed with America as ever. While at Abbey's Theatre they did not break the records, they were remarkably successful, and through the country attractions are steering away from either preceding or following the Irving company.

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"The Shop Girl" has gone on the road. "The Shop Girl's" English manager feels that the out-of-town theatres are not quite as gorgeous as those of the metropolis. From Baltimore this English manager wrote in agony to Charles Frohman: "We had eight border lights at the Broadway Theatre; here we have only six. What can I do?"

Mr. Frohman telegraphed back: "Have no border lights in my pockets; never carry them around; am willing to be searched; shall be here all day."

ALAN DALE.

Amusement Notes.

Frau Materna will be heard at the benefit for the widow of Henry Widmer, at Daly's Theatre, January 23. Ada Rehan and the entire Daly company will also appear in conjunction with other celebrities.

Mlle. Antoinette Szumonska will give her first piano recital at the Mendelssohn Glee Club Hall, Tuesday afternoon. She is a pupil of Paderewski.

Fred Warde will add two Shakespearian plays to his repertory next season. He will devote himself solely to tragedy.

The Cuban revolution is to be done in drama. J. N. Morris is the author, and the play will be produced in St. Paul February 23. It is in four acts and is said to contain some exciting scenes and dramatic situations.

The popularity of "Trilby" does not seem to have waned in outside cities. Its first week in Philadelphia is said to have been a record breaker in point of finances, for the Chestnut Street Theatre.

Esther Hirsch, the contralto, will give a concert on Tuesday evening at the Mendelssohn Glee Club Hall. She will be assisted by Anton Hegner, Bernice James, E. C. Towne, E. L. Raines, and Seismet Doda.

The cast of "The Lady Slaver," which will be produced at the Casino February 17, includes Charles Danby, Dan Daly, W. H. Thompson, Henry Norman, Della Stacey, Babette Rodney, Virginia Earle, Marie Dressler and Isabel Haslam.

Victor Maurel's third and last recital will be given at Chickering Hall Tuesday evening. The programme will consist entirely of German songs.

Rose Coghlan, Maud Harrison, Henry Jewett, John A. Lane, Charles Kent, Ben Horning, Harvey Allen and F. Paget have been secured for Edward Vroom's production of Francois Coppee's "For the Crown." A. M. Palmer's next attraction.